

# Suggested Best Practices for Teaching Workload Allocation

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## Introduction

Ensuring fair and equitable allocation of teaching-related duties is an important problem faced by universities worldwide and in all disciplines. Individual faculty members commonly perceive their own teaching workload as higher than average, and their own department's workload assignment procedure as unfair. Fairness in teaching duty assignment is important in maintaining staff morale, well-being (cf. "burn-out" and "stress-related illnesses" [1, 2, 17]) and consequently quality of teaching. It can be used to highlight areas where resources and demands are not in balance, although it can not resolve issues around absolute load. However, there was at least one study that reported that there was no conclusive evidence or links between workload management and academic staff performance [8].

What makes this problem of workload allocation particularly difficult to tackle, however, is that there exists a wide variety of systems of teaching duty assignment as well as wide disparity in the types of duties assigned by various disciplines. What constitutes "teaching workload" in engineering may differ significantly from that in dentistry, for example. A cursory scan of workload allocation models reveal broad categories such as time-based systems, point-based systems, and ad-hoc systems. Some systems are entirely informal (for example, in small departments) whereas other systems have comprehensive models for assigning workload [1]. In general, however, review of practice shows that one of two approaches is normally taken in the choice of unit to measure workload, either the unit is based on input measures or output measures. For example, a common unit of input measure is contact hours (in a time-based system) supplemented by preparation time, marking allowance, etc. to represent actual hours (weightings can be introduced to account for differences in class sizes). Such an approach is easy to understand, but may lead to a bean-counting culture. In contrast, a move to workload units based on outputs, such as module credits delivered to x number of students (a points-based system), may help avoid problems defining the size of task and encourage flexibility, but can seem detached from 'real time' [1, 2, 15].

In spite of this, pertinent academic research has been carried out which can apply university-wide. How can intense staff dissatisfaction over workload assignment be avoided and what has worked at other universities in overcoming this? The goal of this brief review is thus to recommend "best practices" for the assignment of teaching duties which can be applied by varied disciplines and departments.

It should be noted that this is an emergent field of investigation and many of the studies reviewed here employed subjectivist, theory-building approaches in making recommendations as to best practice. It should also be noted that a number of these studies recognised the need to take a holistic and comprehensive approach to workload allocation. For example, Botha and Swanepoel intercompared Teaching/Research/Other (TRO) vs. Supervision/Teaching/Administration/Research (STAR) division of workload [5].

Botha and Swanepoel [5] described six principles for workload allocation models: transparency, validity, adaptability, reliability, acknowledgment of performance, and facilitation of the negotiation of mutually agreed tasks and outcomes. Workload allocation models need to be fair, reasonable, practical and appropriate. Below, we focus on some characteristics/best practices of well-received models of workload assignment:

### **1. Equitable assignment**

It is important to highlight that in any system where teaching duties are assigned, that not only the assignments be objectively fair, but that the assignments be seen as equitable [1, 2, 5, 7, 12]. Most frameworks allow for Heads of Departments some autonomy in determining their own approach; that although there may be a drive for consistency in enhancing university policy, this does not have to mean conformity (indeed it is recommended that HoDs should not wait for institutional initiative [1, 2]). Based on research conducted in one of New Zealand's 8 public universities with 20,000 equivalent full-time students and 1,700 academic staff from 40 academic departments, it was found that one of the factors which contributed to the successful implementation of a workload allocation model was to adopt department-specific procedures for workload allocation rather than using generic checklists or principles [12].

In the design of a workload allocation model consideration should be given in a systemic way about how the model promotes quality teaching in the face of other workload pressures [10]. For example, some departments may choose to reduce teaching assignments to compensate for a heavy administrative or research workload.

### **2. Transparency**

Satisfying both requirements of equity and fairness is difficult, but two guiding principles have been found which are pertinent and which summarize our findings: Firstly, whatever system is chosen by a department for assigning workload, it should be transparent [7, 12, 15]. Faculty members should know exactly how and why their workload was assigned. Further, the system should be open, and faculty members should be generally aware of their colleagues' teaching workloads [1, 6]. However, the transparency of outcome is not sufficient. It is also important that the decision-making processes behind the workload allocation are impartial and can be seen as such.

However, transparency without collaboration and the possibility of review can lead to problems as workload models permit comparison leading to claims that the models are flawed. All models omit some key variables, or use inappropriate rules of weighting and exceptions. The consequence is a perception of winners and losers, and complaints of unfairness and this has implications for collegiality [10].

### **3. Staff collaboration on the model**

It is further recommended that staff should actively engage in the development of such equity-oriented workload allocation models. In particular, there could be some facilitation of the negotiation of mutually agreed tasks and outcomes [5] as workload models can have significant impact on departmental collegiality. Overall, models are successful where staff collaborate on the model [1, 2, 7, 12, 16]. In the absence of staff collaboration in the development of workload allocation models, colleagues can perceive allocations to be biased [10].

However, institutional culture needs to be taken into consideration, and there are instances when top-down models can work well too although generally collaboration works better.

#### **4. Regular review**

Whatever system is chosen by a department, it should be reviewed regularly (preferably involving stakeholders) to ensure fairness. Some references have recommended a regular review of the workload allocation model to ensure that it accurately represents tasks undertaken and the time required to complete those tasks [12, 16].

Although fairness may never be achieved because of different opinions on what constitutes a fair teaching assignment, a regular review improves perception of fairness, because faculty members then have a say in how the assignment system itself is designed.

#### **Concluding Remarks**

In this review, we have surveyed a broad literature to determine good teaching workload allocation practices which may be applicable across the entire university. While there is no universally well-received model which works well under all circumstances, the general principles highlighted in this review can serve to help departments create models that lead to improved workload allocation processes and practices. Wider benefits would include improvement of collegiality and staff morale.

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